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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 002987

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STATE NEA/ELA FOR ABERCROMBIE-WINSTANLEY/WILLIAMS/DONICK
NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PATRIARCH SFEIR CRITICIZES MICHEL AOUN

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) During a brief September 14 meeting with the Ambassador and poloff at his seat in Bkirke, Maronite Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir discussed the September 6 Maronite Bishop's statement. Deeply concerned by Michel Aoun's alliance with Hizballah, the Patriarch believes that a post-Ramadan civil disobedience campaign would be seriously destabilizing for Lebanon, and that the Siniora government must be supported. Discussing Hassan Nasrallah's recent belligerent al-Jazeera interview, Sfeir believes the Hizballah leader is lashing out because he is under pressure in Lebanon. Lamenting the lack of Christian political unity, Sfeir said that, whereas they used to lead Lebanon's political factions, the Christians are now weakened and split between the Sunni and Shi'i camps. END SUMMARY.

OPEN RACE FOR PRESIDENT

12. (C) Commenting on the Bishop's statement, Sfeir agreed with the Ambassador's interpretation -- vaguely-worded as usual, the statement required extensive reading between the lines -- that the Bishops support a multi-candidate presidential election, but that the candidates must be serious and have the necessary qualifications. Sfeir confided that Michel Aoun had recently asked for the Patriarch's backing for the Presidency, though if Sfeir were to opt for another candidate, Aoun promised to support that person. Sfeir told Aoun that the next President is not for the Patriarch to decide, and that he will back the choice of Parliament.

NOT FOOLED BY AOUN

13. (C) Revealing his true feelings about the mercurial ex-General, Sfeir noted that Aoun is unlikely to win parliamentary approval since he can only rely on votes from his Free Patriotic Movement and Hizballah, which Sfeir implied have become indistinguishable. "General Aoun is Hizballah," said a clearly-annoyed Sfeir, "It's the same party!" Sfeir said he has heard the rumors that Aoun is now receiving money from Iran via Hizballah, and believes Hizballah is merely using Aoun to have a popular Christian

voice on his side, not just the irrelevant Emile Lahoud. Aoun, in turn, hopes to have Hizballah muscle behind his presidential bid.

14. (C) Complimenting the job PM Siniora has done, Sfeir is strongly against changing the government now, as Hizballah and Aoun propose. Sfeir believes these calls are being instigated by the Syrians, who hope that a new government will help suppress the proposed tribunal to try suspects in the Hariri assassination. The Ambassador asked about the rumors of a possible post-Ramadan, Aounist-led campaign of civil strife, which Sfeir replied would be very dangerous for Lebanon -- "The safety of Lebanon is in asking the Siniora government to continue."

HIZBALLAH FEELING THE PRESSURE

15. (C) Sfeir believes that Hassan Nasrallah's increasingly provocative rhetoric is in response to a small but growing trend within the Shi'a community, and more generally throughout Lebanon, against Hizballah retaining its weapons. This includes the recent Bishops' statement, which Sfeir noted Nasrallah had indirectly criticized in his recent al-Jazeera interview. "Hizballah is lashing out because it is not at ease," according to Sfeir, "They have been criticized." Despite this, Hizballah still presents a formidable force, said Sfeir, since the party -- backed by arms and funding from Syria and Iran -- can still enforce or purchase control over Shi'a public opinion in Lebanon.

MARONITE PRESIDENCY: AN EMPTY VESSEL

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16. (C) On the subject of Emile Lahoud, Sfeir commented that "the Presidency has no effectiveness." Concerned that the increasing irrelevance of the Presidency means a relative loss of Maronite political prestige in Lebanon, Sfeir suggested that Lahoud should step down (reiterating a position he first took during his 2005 Christmas Mass sermon). "If you judge your Presidency to be useless," said Sfeir, speaking of Lahoud, "Then why continue?"

THE CRISIS IN CHRISTIAN POLITICS

17. (C) Sfeir worries that the fractious state of Christian politics is similarly diminishing the Christian role vis-a-vis the Sunna and Shi'a. Waxing nostalgic, Sfeir recalled the days after Lebanese independence in 1943, when Maronites -- Bishara el-Khoury and Emile Edde -- headed the two largest interconfessional parliamentary blocs, with Sunna, Shi'a, and Druze arrayed behind them. However, the Christians today head no prominent political bloc, preferring to ally themselves with either the Sunna (Saad Hariri) or Shi'a (Hizballah).

18. (C) When the Ambassador asked whether the Patriarch would assemble leading Christian politicians in Bkirke to try and restore some unity, the Patriarch gave a hopeless shrug of his berobed shoulders and said it would never amount to anything. He recalled when, in 1978, his predecessor brought together at Bkirke the two prominent Maronite clan leaders of the day -- Pierre Gemayel and Suleyman Frangieh -- to resolve their differences. Two days after that, remarked the Patriarch wearily, "the massacre at Ehden happened" (when Phalange forces loyal to Gemayel attacked the Ehden compound of Frangieh's son Tony, killing him, his wife, and daughter).

COMMENT

19. (C) We face the same problem as always with the enigmatic Patriarch: he seems to share our deep concerns

with Michel Aoun's Hizballah alliance, and he appears to be scornful of Aoun's unprincipled ambition. No doubt the Patriarch remembers the embarrassment he suffered at the hands of Aoun's followers in 1989, when the Aounists pulled him out of his patriarchal bed to force him to kiss Aoun's photograph repeatedly to atone for the Patriarch's "sin" of backing the Ta'if accord. But, at the same time, the Patriarch knows that Aoun has a strong following. We guess that the Patriarch masks his words publicly in order to avoid forcing Aoun's Maronite followers to have to choose between Aoun and the Patriarch.

FELTMAN